

The Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic on French Language Testing: Delf/Dalf in Indonesia: Case Study

Faniry Anjarasoa Dimbilalaina^{1*}, and Mualimin Mualimin²

¹Linguistics Department, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Diponegoro

²Linguistics Department, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Diponegoro

Abstract. The covid-19 pandemic outbreak has globally affected various aspects of life, including teaching and learning processes. This paper aims to identify the changes in French language examinations conducted in Indonesia during the outbreak and explore the French language testing conditions, such as the worldwide standardized exams in the French language like DELF: Diploma in the French Language and DALF: Advanced Diploma in the French language. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method by collecting the data through observations, interviews with the French Language Institution and the parties involved in teaching and learning processes, and finally, through documentation. The online version of this test is inexistent. Therefore, the results should allow DELF/DALF examination providers to think about an alternative for an online examination. As shown by the findings on the IFI Indonesia website, it can be concluded that: (1) some examinations, including the French language tests, have been cancelled, (2) the number of test-takers has reduced, (3) the people who are in charge of language testing have made efforts to redress this issue to adapt to this situation.

1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has touched almost the entire population of language test takers worldwide. It is especially true for test-takers using standardized tests to verify their language skills to get admitted to universities or many other reasons. Due to the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic, testing facilities have been forced to close, affecting university applications significantly. Due to current conditions, many language proficiency exams could not be conducted in many, if not all, parts of the world. For example, in June 2020, the two largest providers of English language proficiency tests, Educational Testing Service and the IELTS Consortium (British Council, IDP Education, and Cambridge Assessment English), was unable to administer their exams in person around the world. While some test providers have quickly flipped to online examinations, at-home administration, others have suspended most operations, leaving international test takers and users of test scores with few options. Diverse providers of international tests such as French (DALF, DELF, Ev@lang, TCF1), German

* Corresponding author: dimbilalainafaniry385@gmail.com

(TestDaF, Goethe, SD, IF2), Korean (TOPIK3), and Spanish (DELE4) have suspended or reduced testing because of safety precautions during this pandemic. Other providers have taken intermediate steps to enable at-home testing. For instance, some Confucius Institute Chinese proficiency tests (e.g., HSK9) have been conducted at home by a limited number of examinees. This paper focuses on the Covid-19 impacts of French language standardized examinations: DELF and DALF in Indonesia. Several publishing companies of standardized assessments have developed guidelines for administering tests via tele practice or administering validated online assessments. Additional researchers examined the validity of in-person and remote assessment protocols (Sutherland et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2014). Unfortunately, the apparition of the Covid-19 leading to the lockdown of Indonesia in 2020, March 2nd, has strongly impacted several activities, including the postponement or even the cancellation of this very test of the French language. Indeed, in Indonesia, health and security issues associated with the Covid-19 pandemic have resulted in the temporary suspension of DELF and DALF sessions of June/July 2020 and the closing of examination centers in various geographical regions in the country. As it has been stated on the IFI website, they have declared: “After further evaluation of the current situation related to the COVID-19 virus pandemic, we decided not to hold the DELF-DALF exam for the June / July 2020 session. We hope that we will still be able to hold October sessions for DELF Prim and November for DELF-DALF Tout Public, Junior, and Scolaire.”

Kellaghan and Greaney (2020) recognize both the advantages and downsides of high-stakes examinations in their World Bank report, *Public Examinations Examined*. Exams have historically been associated with equity and accomplishment as a means of extending educational opportunities to people who may have been excluded due to inequitable standards. Additionally, they give a fair assessment method covering student-teacher ties, political and familial influence, and socioeconomic background (Kellaghan and Greaney 2020). On the other hand, underprivileged groups such as Indigenous students and those with limited socioeconomic resources have been marginalized by test systems that may serve to replicate social hierarchies. Exams are believed to benefit teachers and students by focusing them on critical areas of the curriculum. However, because of the artificial conditions and time limits, they do not accurately assess the different abilities that curricula attempt to build (Kellaghan and Greaney 2020). Regardless of the possible benefits tests may give in certain situations, the potentially disturbing impacts of international comparative testing (e.g., PISA) and national and state-based standardized testing on curriculum, pedagogy, and student and teacher well-being are well established (e.g., Kelly 2019; Lingard et al. 2016; OECD 2017; Stobart 2008; Volante 2017).

The French language is the world’s fifth most widely spoken. There are nearly 300 million French speakers worldwide, fifth in global language employment, after Chinese, English, Spanish, and Arabic. However, this ranking has been disputed by experts who claim that the method used to count populations in places where the French language is employed as an official language is misleading. According to experts, Ethnologists’ calculation, in which French is ranked 14th among world languages, could be more accurate. French is used in 32 states, and it is also an international language. Apart from large foreign institutions such as the United Nations and international sporting competitions such as the Olympics, 32 national governments have designated French as an official language. This language retains its status as one of the most typed languages globally. It is the fourth most common language on the web, after English, Chinese, and Spanish. Likewise, it is the third official language of industry and trade. French is the first language used by 13% of European Union people, which places it fourth in terms of native speakers in the European Union, behind German, English, and Italian. At the same time, the UK’s withdrawal from the EU has prompted the French to third position in 2020. It is also the second most common language taught in schools in Europe, after English, with slightly more than 26% of students enrolling in

secondary school. The African continent has the highest concentration of French language learners and 59% of all French speakers (those born into and living in the French language). The language is more commonly used by younger generations in Africa than older generations. The majority of African parents (or future parents) hope to pass it on to their offspring. In 2019, there were 51 million French language students worldwide. This statistic covers French language learners as the second-largest language learners worldwide, behind English language learners. According to researches, French is instructed in every country on Earth, but most students are in Africa, closely followed by Europe. Many Indonesian students have foreign language preferences besides English. English is officially taught in classrooms. Some may take classes at language courses or cultural centers, although fluency results can vary. France Embassy has formally endorsed several language centers in Indonesia to learn French: Medan, Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, Bali, and Balikpapan. However, there are few French speakers in Indonesia, and even the French speakers are not that visible. Each year, there are more than 11.000 students who study the French language. The learners are taught by experienced and certified professional teachers who were trained in France and Indonesia; the French language course at IFI is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. IFI is also the only institution in Indonesia authorized to hold internationally recognized French language certification exams.

In the French learning process, the learners can also take standardized language tests. There are officially eighteen French proficiency tests. DELF and DALF are official diplomas provided by France Education International in collaboration with the French Ministry of National Education. The DELF and DALF are developed to test candidates' communicative abilities and practical language skills in everyday situations. The levels are CEFR-based. The candidates are not expected to complete a previous stage before registering to examine their decision. Each degree evaluates four skills: listening, communicating, reading, writing. These diplomas are not only globally recognized and approved, but they are also valid for life, which is advantageous if the candidates are either enrolled in school or already employed. The DELF is a precious diploma, especially when applying for French jobs or university degrees in France. The majority of undergraduate and graduate programs require a B2 certification, though some accept B1. B1 and B2 are also the amounts required by most French employers if the job requires a moderate amount of French. Candidates who fail the level cannot protest their scores. However, they can ask to review their papers and scores at their local testing site. There is no limit on the number of times an applicant can take the test unless they have already passed. They can retake only if they apply in writing before the examination session to withdraw their current diploma. This latter action risks the previously issued diploma remains invalid if an applicant fails the diploma on a retake.

In Indonesia, DELF and DALF examinations are held three times a year for the Tout Public, Junior, and scholar categories: in March, June, and November, and twice a year for Prim category: in May and June. They are coordinated by the French Institute of Indonesia (IFI) and Alliance Française (AF), approved by the Centre for Educational Studies (CIEP). The French Cultural Office or the corresponding French embassy in the country of concern is responsible for test distribution. Registration fees are determined by the French embassy's Department for Cooperation and Cultural Affairs (SCAC) and the National Commission, taking into account local factors such as operating costs and, theoretically, affordability for the test taker and the degree of examination desired by the applicant. It ranges between Rp275.000 and Rp800.000 in Indonesia. The exam takes place in certified centers under the supervision of certified French language teachers, and the tests are not available for the online format. Throughout the exam, applicants with disabilities have access to a variety of accommodations, including two alternate test versions of braille and large-print versions of test papers for blind or visually disabled candidates, as well as headphones for people with hearing problems.

This paper aims to identify the modifications in French language tests administered in Indonesia since the pandemic outbreak until now and to examine the testing conditions for DELF and DALF examinations. To reach the goals of this paper, three questions need to be answered. The research answers two main questions:

1. How the pandemic impacted on French language examinations: in the test-takers' number, their motivations, their competence in the language?
2. How did the test providers cope with this global pandemic, in the beginning of the pandemic and now?

2 Methodology

The general objective of this study was to analyze the motivations and perceptions of the students who wished to conduct the DELF and DALF examinations and have an overview of how the global pandemic affected this language testing in particular. The data were gathered using a descriptive qualitative approach, more precisely the case study approach to reach this objective. The case confirms that French language testing has been touched by this pandemic as well, like many other examinations, and has brought some changes in its implementation. According to Wiewiorka (1992), the case study is an in-depth examination of one or a few research subjects, allowing for acquiring both general and thorough information about the latter. It is founded on the principle that if we closely observe some unit of a particular universe, we will gain a general understanding of it and thereby provide a framework for subsequent analysis. The study here focused on how the global pandemic affected each aspect of French language testing. All the data were collected from the official website of the Institut Français d'Indonésie (IFI) for information about the tests and any modifications made since covid-19. Then, for further information, a brief interview with Alliance Française Semarang was conducted, inquiring about these reforms and the interventions implemented in the aftermath of the lockdown due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

3 Results and discussions

First of all, as said before, the covid-19 pandemic has strongly affected every aspect of everyone's life, especially education. Many nations, including Indonesia, have adopted policies that exclude all educational activities, requiring the government and associated organizations to include alternate educational processes for students and students who cannot participate in educational institutions. The IFI website has officially announced in their website the suspension of the examinations on June 12th, 2020: "After further evaluation of the current situation regarding the COVID-19 virus pandemic, we decided not to hold the DELF-DALF exam for the June / July 2020 session. We hope to be still able to hold October sessions for DELF Prim and November for DELF-DALF Tout Public, Junior, and Scolaire." However, some other activities were not suspended. For instance, they continued to run the French courses so that the French language learners could keep up improving their skills. They could prepare for the next session of the DELF/DALF exam and get more chances to pass the examination for the next session in November 2020, get more opportunities to receive more detailed information about continuing study in France.

The IFI proposed different courses at different levels and motivations for many reasons, primarily for academics or work. The classes are conducted offline, but the students can choose the more convenient classroom: at home, at the office, or the IFI/Alliance Française. They still provide courses for the DELF and DALF examinations, with trained teachers who have already passed and received certificates as examiners and proofreaders. One solution for the exam would be that they consider online exams. However, the DELF/DALF are taken

under examinations conditions. Therefore, it is not possible to adapt the requirements to online exams. However, they have elaborated some changes for the A2 to C2 levels. The changes were mainly about the format of the exams. For example, the number of questions, the duration of reading tests to reduce stress, and the C1 and C2 levels topics. Even though those changes were made at the beginning of the pandemic, there is no connection with this situation. This new format will be implemented gradually, so it is not yet active worldwide, but it should be soon available for every country until 2023.

After that, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused significant complications to language and literacy skills. Globally, COVID-19-induced impairment in language and literacy development has been noticed, beginning as early as kindergarten (World Literacy Foundation, 2020). Students learning French or English as a second language (L2) encounter unique hurdles since the L2 learners do not have much input at home, especially without the internet; the lack of input at home is more prominent. At the same time, online classes limit students' academic language input. Teachers reported getting little to no systematic direction during the first several months of the pandemic. As a result, some instructors could only deliver a few hours of synchronous learning per week, while others were forced to teach entirely in an asynchronous format. It was hard to apply the pedagogy required for continuous academic language acquisition (e.g., group projects or pair work). Teachers who were needed to adapt to the latest COVID-19 protocols in face-to-face classrooms encountered similar difficulties. For instance, because students were required to sit at their desks and study independently, social distance regulations hindered students from engaging in academic language-building activities such as collaborative book reading and small group conversations.

Additionally, experiential learning activities such as field trips, school community gardening, and science experiments had to be eliminated. Additionally, some teachers were required to adjust to the new reality by developing curriculum materials and making them available to students via different modes of instruction (face-to-face, remote, or hybrids of both), despite frequently lacking the time or technical support to do so. This problem has strongly affected the students' motivation and performance in the French language, increasing the number of students. Consequently, the number of test-takers has also experienced a drastic decrease. If in one year the number of test-takers can reach more than 11.000, it had drastically decreased in 2020. It is due to the cancellation of the sessions and the restrictions in the health protocol towards the Covid-19 pandemic. DELF/DALF examinations were reopened to test-takers again for the next session in October 2020; however, since they need special conditions, the learners cannot take the DELF/DALF exams online, so the students have to do it offline and follow the new standard protocols. From the first cancellation of the DELF/DALF examinations until now, only two tests have been conducted: DELF PRIM in October 2020 and DELF/DALF in March 2021. Unfortunately, the DELF/DALF exam session of November 2020 was not held. This latter has more participants than DELF PRIM, so it is more difficult to follow the DELF/DALF sessions protocol. Since the session of March 2021 could have taken place, it means that they have established somehow specific strategies to implement the test in all the respective usual sessions.

4 Conclusion

This research has confirmed the impacts of Covid-19 on the French language testing: DELF and DALF, although they were not massive changes, are noticeable. The pandemic has forced many educational firms to close their institutions and cancel public tests (standardized tests such as DELF or DALF). That situation leads the learners to lose motivation and, therefore, decrease the number of test-takers. Those changes impact the motivation of the students and

the teachers and the financial aspects of those institutions. The examination must be taken exclusively offline, and it is inconceivable to conduct this kind of test online. Therefore, the sessions had to be canceled. However, the private courses of the French language from the French institutions in Indonesia were still ongoing to help the learners to get ready for future examinations. After reviewing the new protocols of the new-normal measures for this pandemic condition, the tests are now resumed by following all the health protocols, which inquires a smaller number of test-takers. Private sessions should be considered during this French-language test and online sessions to make it more accessible to the students who want to take the test, especially for academic and work needs. Many people worldwide need DELF/DALF examinations to continue their studies in France, work in a francophone country, or for other reasons. However, this pandemic is dangerous for everybody's health and well-being because it involves limiting contact with other people. Providing an online version of the test should be considered and studied to overcome this issue.

References

1. E. Catherine, *Test review: certifying French competency: The DELF tout public (B2)*, **35**, p.615-623, 19 July 2018, University of Melbourne Australia, (2018)
2. Dina Tsagari, Henrik Bøhn, *Special Issue "Recent Developments in Language Testing and Assessment"*, 20 September 2020, (2020)
3. Daniel R. Isbell, Benjamin Kremmel, *Test Review: Current options in at-home language proficiency tests for making high-stakes decisions*, **37**, 16 July 2020, 1890 East-West Road, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA, (2020)
4. Kellaghan, T., & Greaney, V., *Public examinations examined*. Washington, DC: World Bank. (2020)
5. Sutherland, R., Hodge, A., Trembath, D., Drevensek, S., & Roberts, J. (2016, September). *Overcoming barriers to using telehealth for standardized language assessments*. Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups, 1(SIG 18), 41–50, (2016)
6. Guofang Li, Roksana Dobrin-De Grâce, Zhuo Sun, Meishi Haslip, Diana Burchell, Julia Rivard Dexter and Xi Chen, *Promoting Second Language Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Parents' and Teachers' Coping Strategies* (2021)
7. World Literacy Foundation, (2020)
8. Alliance française website, (2020)
9. Institut Français Indonesia website, (2020)
10. France Education International (2020)